

A Cage, Shattered

“Drowned in a birthing pool”, the warriors quipped as the sad, bedraggled bundle was dragged onto the bone walkway, “there’s irony to make an Incubus smile”.

“Quiet, curse your soul”, Kaldaz, first-barb of the Envenomed Thorn Kabal snapped, eyes not moving from the sodden corpse. His mission was technically a success; he’d discovered why the Sawbones had failed to fulfil his obligations; but he doubted that technicality would spare him the Queen of Thorns’ wrath when he reported the Haemonculus dead. Dracon; despite her overbearing pride, even the Queen of Thorns was not suicidal enough to risk the ire of a true Kabal by proclaiming herself archon; Kaleena was undoubtedly insane but hers was a dangerous madness, unleashed only when beneficial and Kaldaz, as he was often reminded by the debauched nobles of her court, would be no great loss.

For all twenty-seven names he had etched onto the handles of *Scorn*, the great klaive inherited from the previous first-barb, he was merely a Kabalite.

Flicking the corpse over with his toe, he glanced dismissively at the shrivelled face as he snapped order,

“Sybarite”, the leader of the Kabalites the Queen had granted him stepped forwards, “I doubt the Sawbones has fallen to She-Who-Thirsts”, he certainly hoped not; he’d privately sworn to deliver the withered creature’s soul to Her himself, “there should be another body in this cesspool. Find it so I can put it to the question”. The unhelmed Kabalite nodded, her squad scattering as Kaldaz straightened, pushing his klaive back under the ceremonial cloak lying over his shoulders like a funeral shroud,

“We have our answer”, he said, meeting her monovision with a steady gaze, “though it brings only more questions – what could slay a Haemonculus in his own pit?”

“Mandrakes, perhaps”, she offered, the ugly scar bisecting her lifeless left eye flaring an ugly red in the dead-light of the Sawbones’ subterranean lair, “hired by rivals?”

“Perhaps”, Kaldaz admitted at length, “but why now? The Shoals are suffering after the last raid and the Sawbones doesn’t restore just our Kabal – whoever did this has made many enemies, the Fist of Thorns first amongst them”.

“Then they are dead”, the sybarite stated, “they just don’t know it yet”.

“They are dead; I don’t intend to share their fate; appearing before the Queen with dire news and death will be the least terror awaiting us”, Kaldaz spat, glaring at her, “have your warriors dragged this maggots’ new host from its hole yet?”

She put a finger to her ear and muttered lowly; Kaldaz glanced away, envious as the sybarite unknowingly mocked his own disability. After crawling from the fighting pit so long ago, drenched

in blood and clutching the klaive he'd wrested from the dead grip of the Kabals' former champion, Kaleena's first order had delivered her new first-barb to the Sawbones' slab. He remembered the tortures there dimly, mostly a red, agonised haze and the ancient Eldars' gurgling laughter as the bone drill scoured his right ear. He'd been deaf in it ever since, deaf to all save his dracon; the Sawbones had replaced his ear-drum with a small, slug-like thing grown from her own flesh, the semi-living symbiote dripping the poisoned honey of her commands directly into his brain. By her voice was he controlled, a Kabalite attack dog leashed to a Trueborn's finger; a slave with privilege and prestige, but a slave nevertheless.

And prestige was fleeting, for him even moreso than the average Kabalite; only by remaining undefeated both within and without the Envenomed Thorn did Kaldaz retain his station. A loss would mean *Scorn* passing into his successors' hand, his name engraved on one of the weapons' multiple handles in his own acidified blood, his last mark upon Commorrhagh's history. At least now he was unchallenged within the Envenomed Thorn; indeed his last challenger stood not two paces away. The sybarite had been flush with her successes during the last real-space raid, too blind to realise she was dooming herself by bloodying the thorns with him. He had taken her eye for such blindness, though Kaleena had been in a merciful mood and ended the dual before *Scorn* could truly feast. That had been some time ago, though as the dark city existed outside of real-space time was a sketchy affair at best; only after being summoned and dismissed by his dracon to uncover why her Kabal lacked new warriors to replace the raids' losses had he seen the sybarite again. The Shoals of Malediction, a minor flesh-port mirror of High Commorrhagh infested and fought over by so-called Kabals that were little more than established street gangs such as the Thorn, were glutted with slave-meat and souls but it would not last. If the Kabal was still under strength when life returned to its normal routine of murder and mayhem, their enemies would sense weakness and go for the kill.

And such weakness we cannot prevent; for all his personal skill Kaldaz was no fool. He could hold five, even ten assailants; what use would that be against hundreds if their rivals attacked; *without the flesh-craft of this misbegotten wretch we're broken*. He lashed out, his kick sliding the corpse along the walkway above the oil-slick birthing pool, waters he had emerged from so long ago. As the Sawbones' shrivelled skull lolled on his bird-like neck something caught the first-barbs' eye, making him look closer. In the sickly red light of the underground hell the desiccated husk's eyes gleamed sightlessly, reflecting something that Kaldaz recognised like a lover returning,

"Sybarite", he didn't take his eyes off the dead face, even his impaired hearing enough to pinpoint the other Kabalite, "look there, tell me what you see". He could taste her confusion, a savoury sweet-meat that only became more prominent as she squatted for a clearer look,

"Fear?" Her scarred face glanced up, brow furrowed, "What would the agonised fear?"

“What indeed?” Kaldaz murmured as a muted buzz cut their discovery short, the sybarite speaking as she stood,

“They have him first-barb, but, something is wrong – whatever means the Sawbones had to cheat She-Who-Thirsts was imperfect”. Kaldaz said nothing, staring at the dead elders’ eyes as though he could divine the answer from those flat black surfaces before abruptly turning away,

“Show me”.

The route to the Sawbones’ inner sanctum was a journey through horror, the pages of a diseased mind even by the perilously low standards of their kind open for all to see. They passed through chambers of flayed skin that still breathed, twitching, limbless corpses hellishly fused to the walls and writhing in agony as here and there massive, bloated grotesques stood like macabre sentinels. Idly curious, Kaldaz waved a bladed hand over the grilled face-plate of one of the twisted giants,

“Are they dead, merely static without their master’s voice or both?”

“Likely both, or if not dead they soon will be”, the sybarite answered, “the ancient ones chain their pets tightly. If the Sawbones is truly dead they’ll likely rot as soon as the preservatives in them are expended”.

“This vile hovel will soon join its putrefying master – perhaps this night isn’t a waste”, Kaldaz chuckled blackly, ducking through a doorway opened by a point-blank blaster shot, “how far to go?”

“Not far first-barb”, the sybarite assured him, pointing towards something hidden behind a rack of sludge-like alchemical components, “through there; Lizilthre, what news?” The Kabalite, his black helmet illuminated with a slash of dried blood to mimic his sybarites’ scar, nodded respectfully before answering,

“We’ve located a birthing pod but nothing’s moving within. We didn’t breach it, as ordered”.

“Good”, Kaldaz said, striding past and reaching for *Scorn*, “if anyone’s going to finally cast the Sawbones into the maw of She-Who-Thirsts it’s going to be me”.

Partially recessed into the semi-organic wall the birthing pod was a great copper tube bedecked with bone, a squat, metallic spider in the epicentre of a gurgling web of fluted metal pipes. Fluids none present dared think too much about hissed and burbled, the small view-screen within filled with liquid as black as its creators’ heart. Striding forwards, unable to pierce the murk within, Kaldaz shot a glance towards the Kabalite closest to the control panel for the macabre apparatus,

“Can you get this open?”

“No first-barb”, the helmed warrior shook its head, armour and voice androgynous, “all appears to be functioning normally. I can only assume it opens from the inside”.

“And anyone we could have asked is through there, dead”, another warrior, weighed down with the sleek deadliness of a splinter cannon, added, the barrel of the heavy weapon twitching towards another door off to the left, “eight wracks, none living”.

“And with them the chance of knowing what happened. Get one aboard the skiff”, he barked, the two Kabalites jumping to comply, “if any can drag the truth from those entertaining the Souleater the Queen will find them. Now”, all nearby fell back a pace as Kaldaz drew back his klaive, “let’s see how well the Sawbones has seasoned his broth”.

The pod yielded reluctantly; only after a half-dozen blows, each capable of shearing a brutish ork in twain, did the front rip open. Stepping back to avoid the black amniotic fluid spattering his polished boots, Kaldaz waited for them to drain away before using *Scorns*’ tip to flip over the face-down corpse. An exact replica of the one fished out of the birthing pool down to the elongated, extra-jointed fingers and pared-away eyelids its eyes were empty as a dolls’, devoid of even the fear that had grasped its forerunner. Flicking the residue off *Scorns*’ edge, Kaldaz sneered,

“So the Sawbones is truly dead – pity, I wanted to end him myself”, the first-barb admitted, “we’ve wasted enough time here. Carry that corpse to the raider, we’ll drag the meat back to the Root Spire and inform...”

He tailed off as a low hissing infiltrating the cavern, flaps of flayed skin pulsating like grotesque lips as the noise issued from every unnatural orifice like escaped steam. In a fighting crouch, back to the tube he’d just smashed open, Kaldaz watched the sybarite shout something into her wrist communicator and wait a few heartbeats for a response,

“First-barb, Xipyill and Zanthé report from the birthing chambers. The waters are boiling, throwing up bodies”, she paused again, remaining eye widening into a pool of venomous green, “they report the bodies are Envenomed Thorn!”

“Alive?” She speared a finger at the dead Haemonculus

“No, like him”.

“Back to the raider”, Kaldaz was already rushing past the sybarite, knowing concern for the Kabal, the only safety affordable to their vat-born kind, would stop her filling his back with shards of razor-edged glass, “get the bodies aboard, to the Root at all speed! The Kabal is under attack!”

As his boot-soles alighted on the lightweight skiffs deck he could hear the dracon, voice slurred from whatever exotic chemicals her twin handmaidens had procured for her, drunkenly snarled for him to return and chastise one of the guard towers for failing to report in. As the biting Commorragh wind caught the sails of his commandeered raider, the *Night Spear*, and it jetted towards their Kabal’s territory, Kaldaz had no choice but to listen as events unfolded. Uncaring as the sybarite growled terse orders and the crew took a few pot-shots at wretches gathered in the street shadows, Kaldaz remained motionless as his Kabal’s fate filtered through his ear implant.

The slug in place of his eardrum only received, it could not transmit; through it he heard the Queen’s court celebrations dim, the Kabal’s suffering infiltrating the Trueborns’ drug-induced fug.

Dracon Kaleena was many things, sadistic and insane least of all, but she was not stupid; whatever fool assaulted the Root, stronghold of her Kabal, would be met with everything at her disposal. However as buildings were blurred into continuous motion by the skilful hand at the *Spears'* helm his expression only darkened; the Queen's commands devolved from airy requests to angry demands, then terse, controlled threats of torture worse than their dreaded god could evoke upon his pitiful soul if he did not return. Around her voice he heard the rest of her court and a cold smile flitted across his lips; the thought of those decadent political swine trying to defend themselves from a foe formidable enough to scatter the warrior Kabalites they were supposedly aloof from enough to cheer even his embittered soul.

His joy, however, was short-lived; despite his loathing for the mad bitch that shackled his skill to her merest whim, he scowled as he heard panic infiltrating her voice; *does she fear losing control of the Kabal? It would be her death if she did*; that was certainly true – a victorious enemy would likely induct the rank and file Kabalites into their own ranks but the new dracon would annihilate the old leadership to avoid future insurrection. Kaldaz was not too concerned with the Envenomed Thorn falling; on the Shoals of Malediction he had a reputation of sorts, a prized claim for any dracon. The idea of exchanging one mistress for another was drowning out Kaleena's increasingly frantic words before a sudden explosion in Kaldaz's right ear almost dropped him to his knees.

Recollecting himself and grateful none present had knifed him in the back during his momentary weakness Kaldaz felt a coldness apart from the chill of the night. His duty in real-space was to protect his mistress, a task made more difficult by her want to plunge headlong into the thickest fighting, and failing that duty had seen him punished often. His body was marred with whip-stroke and other marks of casual torture inflicted as the dracon had her injuries tended, cackling as he suffered for her wounds, and she had suffered many wounds since he had become first-barb. Never before, however, not even following a *mon-keigh* grotesques' gun barrel reducing her left leg to splintered ruin, had he heard the Queen of Thorns scream as she just had.

It was not a battle-laugh, nor a noise drawn from the throes of passion (which, standing guard outside her chamber doors; as close, she declared, as any vat-born would ever come to dominating her; he'd heard often enough) but the bestial, terrified screech of those glimpsing She-Who-Thirsts before the hungry god devoured them. And it was not alone; the screams tore into his head unceasing, unremitting until they were silenced, sudden as a sliced throat. The absence struck him, a pillar of his life ripped away as it dawned on him that Kaleena was gone, likely dead or wishing she was – much as he'd often dreamed of the moment the insane woman was forever damned, the reality left him bereft rather than elated. Taking a breath he forced his mind calm; much as his people unashamedly let their emotions run wild, a fate their miserable cousins of the Craftworlds shied away from, Kaldaz knew wildness would only hinder him here.

He knew the truth, a truth surprisingly bitter, even as the *Night Spear* purred gracefully to a halt across from the entrance to the Root Spire, the sybarite glancing to him as she rallied her squad, he knew what must be done,

“First-barb, I cannot raise any of the guard posts. Your orders?” Exhaling a fatalistic breath he gave his last command,

“Flee”.

They didn’t understand, of course they didn’t; the death-screams of the Envenomed Thorn echoed in his head not theirs, bleeding wounds in both his memory and his sanity as he addressed them,

“The Kabal has fallen”, he stated colourlessly, all eyes on him though his piercing glare stopped any voicing their thoughts, “cling to your lives elsewhere, the Jade Talon or the Bloodless, they’ll need new warriors as the Sawbones is dead. Show them the corpses and tell them the Haemonculus ’s fate, they’ll likely grant you a place in their ranks”.

“What of you first-barb?” The splinter-cannon armed warrior spoke, evidently second in command as the sybarite didn’t lash him for his insolence. Kaldaz turned to the gore-encrusted helm and smirked cruelly,

“Our dracon still lives”, he could hear her mindless, agonised whimpering through his implant, “she has failed and lost the Envenomed Thorn. I go to claim her soul as is my right – with it I can parley whatever her incompetence has left to our conquerors”. Without a further word he alighted, jumping down from the skiff soundlessly and turning to gaze up at the warriors now clustered around their leader, the sybarite glaring down in disdain,

“Your soul is forfeit should we meet again”, Kaldaz nodded coldly,

“As is your own”. His gaze didn’t drop as the raider lifted once more, the whine of its anti-gravity engines building in pitch until it sped away into the night, the first-barbs’ cloak flapping at its passage. Dismissing the squad from his mind entirely to focus on his purpose, the gladiator Kabalite strode towards the darkened, deserted gates of the Root.

There were no farewells in the Dark City, just promises of murder delayed.

The Wall of Thorns was the first indication something was very wrong; with his night-attuned vision he could easily pick out the patina of red droplets spattered at its foot. The fleshy cargo pinned upon it was silent and still, nothing left where once misery and pain had swept froth like ethereal mist, a soothing balm to an *Eldarith Ynneas* soul. It was one of Kaleena’s multiple madnesses made manifest; upon return from real-space the most worthless chattel would be impaled, still-living, upon the barbed iron spikes of this wall, a tradition mocked by the Envenomed Thorns’ rivals too blind to see the truth behind the insanity. The voluntary sacrifice of worthless flesh was a surprisingly altruistic gesture for their cut-throat society, an irresistible lure for the dispossessed

and the desperate that infested the Shoals like maggots. The guard towers, flanking the tribute wall, were on constant watch for these wretches; those who threw themselves heedlessly at the wall were shredded instantly by splinter fire or, if they survived the fusillade, earned a place of honour upon the display, while those with the control to feast surreptitiously were inducted, willingly or otherwise, into the Kabalites who dwelt behind the wailing structure.

It was a sadistic genius, one even Kaldaz was forced to admire in his dracon; *former dracon, as she is now*. Long had their rivals wondered how the Thorn outnumbered them given Kaleena's insistence of being first in the raids and only he and a select few of the Trueborn knew the whole truth. The Wall of Thorns was but one sheaf in a manuscript of macabre brilliance and, as the first-barb gazed up with a scowl of disappointment, his sourness was sweetened by the knowledge that he was now the sole keeper of that particular record, another chit with which to endear himself to his new master.

For now the wall no longer wailed, its cargo perforated by hails of splinter fire and left as rags of bloodied flesh. Nothing was spared, nothing left alive and Kaldaz turned away, seeing a splinter cannon lying discarded nearby, the long barrel caked with the blood that oozed down the torture structure. *Small wonder no slave-meat survived; at that range even a grotesque would be cut to ribbons*; the first-barb shook his head, klaive already in his hand as he threw a withering look towards the guard towers; *how could they not have seen this doom before it fell upon us – were they drunk on soul-fodder and slave tears?* The question nagged at his mind, prickles of unease sliding along his spine as he opened his thumb along *Scorn's* edge and flicking a bead of blood onto the console that controlled the door opening. If their attacker had wasted time and firepower silencing the Envenomed Thorns' outer wall, how had the Kabal fallen seemingly without a shot being fired?

The corpses in the courtyard brought no answer; the two sentries had likely been the first victims of the night. Rolling one over with his foot, Kaldaz was somewhat relieved to see cause of death being something he could identify. The warriors' chest plate was pierced cleanly by a precise thrust from a pointed weapon, likely a sword, straight through his guard and his heart. Pausing to check the courtyard was deserted Kaldaz knelt down, unclipping the Kabalites' helmet and almost grateful at the dead Eldar's expression of incongruous surprise rather than the blank terror he'd seen earlier. *So, he was killed unexpectedly by an enemy that slaughtered everything on the wall just behind him and scaled the wall without alerting any of the watching guards? Treachery perhaps*; it seemed likely – one of their rivals could have poisoned some of their Kabalites to open the gates and raise no alarm; *though if that is the case, the traitors have received their reward*. Moving away but keeping to the shadows to avoid eyes from within the Root, the former champion edged towards the back of the sprawling compound.

The Root Spire, or simply the Root, was a former production facility that had changed hands when Kaleena, cementing her reputation on the Shoals of Malediction, masterfully evicted its former tenants, breaking the back of their power. Wearing the skinned faces of Ebon Claw Kabalites the Queen of Thorns and her small retinue had struck, seizing their rivals' agglomerated slave-stock and unbarring the gates before the Ebon Claw were aware of their peril. It was a loss they couldn't recover; their former protection as weapons and raider suppliers stripped away, the Claw had swiftly been torn apart by their rivals. As a monument to her triumph Kaleena had relocated her entire Kabal, their previous slum-quarters set ablaze with their former slaves trapped screaming inside, a final spite to their low origins as the Envenomed Thorn moved into more dangerous circles.

Since those younger days the Root had grown and been fortified by its mistress, strangling all with a grip of barbed iron and razor glass, its former production capacity and slaves moved elsewhere as her Kabal swelled in number and ambition. Organo-metallic tubers from the Sawbones' lair had been sown, watered in the blood of slaves to grow twisting, nightmarish vegetation over the entire structure, so much so that slave work crews fought a constant battle to burn back the invasive, semi-intelligent plant, a battle not fought without loss. Kaldaz passed several such victims on his circuit, the brutish humans and idiotic blue-skinned race impaled and dead upon the spikes that now extracted nutrition from their carrion. The first-barb spared them not a glance, instead focussed upon the two rear watchtowers, his stealth betrayed only at the windows of the closest.

Whichever unfortunate had drawn guard duty now guarded nothing save the sphincter of She-Who-Thirsts. A bright splash of blood besmirched the window, the sight of the drying gore feeding the paranoia now gnawing at Kaldaz's mind. *All our guards silenced before the alarm was raised – this was not our enemies work*; and it wasn't, it couldn't be. Not only did the watchtower window eliminate Bloodless involvement, even if that fastidious Kabal put aside their idiosyncrasies to join every other faction set against Kaleena's possibly compromised forces, it was inconceivable that the trap was sprung this expertly. Dead guards and lone splinter cannon aside Kaldaz had seen no evidence of battle, no hint of the Envenomed Thorn reacting to the wolf at their door. Gripping *Scorn* ever more tightly he raced across the still courtyard, sheltering momentarily behind each vile knot of pulsating, semi-metallic plant matter that burst through the black stone irregularly until he was within the lee of the Root Spire's rear. Once more dribbling blood onto a concealed access panel, the first-barb waited as some of the nearby tendrils, reared and tamed by Kaleena's hand if legends were true, uncurled from the door they embraced like gloom around an Incubus. With a whisper the panel slid open and in the next heartbeat, Kaldaz was inside.

The air was colder than a mandrakes' kiss, the chill stopping the growth outside infiltrating within, but even as he exhaled a frigid breath Kaldaz could feel, could intrinsically *sense* something amiss. Beyond the cold lurked another factor, a loss he could feel but not quite place; not for the first time in this night of endings, the first-barb felt fear's claw about his heart, squeezing relentlessly and urging him to turn back. *Even if I did though, who would have me as I am*; he fought such irrational worry with ice-edged logic, the promise of power dangled in front of him trickling through his veins like a drug; *whoever has entered the Root and slain our queen is powerful, more powerful by far than any on the Shoals. With them and Kaleena's head I could be more, much more than I would be here, scraping at the feet of a Trueborn witch.* No; resolved once more he stepped forth; *I go on, at least until the Queen is dead by my hand.*

He paced silently through the halls, senses alert as he progressed through the secret pathway, the evacuation route that led through the main hall of the warrior Kabalites. The brutal simplicity of Kaleena's last plan filled her first-barb with equal parts loathing and admiration; should the Root fall, she and her court would call the warriors to make their final stand in the main hall, the Queen leading from the front for the last time. *The last time for her Kabalites at least*; he sneered mentally, cursing both Kaleena's black soul and the stupidity of his fellow vat-born for not realising that they were and would always be considered disposable; *her last order would have the twins kiss out a toxin to drive all without the antidote frenzied, unable to die save by being torn apart. In the blood-rage the Trueborn would escape, their minions extracting a heavy price from our attackers and letting Kaleena rally what remained of the Thorn from our slave-pits and manufactories.*

In the aftermath of such a plan he would be the last vat-born survivor, the antidote to the Lhamaean venom one of a myriad of combat drugs his body naturally produced following his treatment at the Sawbones' dead hand. It was elegant brutality, a plan to make even the father of Commorrhagh raise a manicured eyebrow at but, he stiffened as he tasted the air again, evidently it had failed. The scent of blood was heavy, his nostrils flaring at the odour as the air around him grew warmer, carrying that dire, sweet bouquet. *Scorn* was held before him, its weight a comfort as he approached the hidden door, tensing to spring as his tainted biology fired a concoction of chemicals directly into his aorta, he slammed the door open with the head of his weapon.

The smell hit like a physical blow but he ignored it; he'd walked through several charnel houses in his career as first-barb. His eyes were everywhere, piercing gaze penetrating the murk and discounting the Dark Eldar lying sprawled like broken, bleeding dolls. Vision sharpened and reactions taut as a Wych's shard-net, only when Kaldaz was certain there was no immediate threat did he lower *Scorn's* edge, cast off his ceremonial cloak before it could mop up the shed vitae and examine in detail the last remains of the Kabal of the Envenomed Thorn.

It wasn't the whole Kabal of course; there were a hundred and some others scattered across the slave-pens and production facilities outside the Root Spire; but the true power of Kaleena's warriors now lay broken in their home. Running the figures in his head the first-barb worried his lower lip slightly, the humidity from the now-congealed blood not enough to banish the disquiet plucking at his mutilated heart. *This makes no sense*; he had expected the warriors of the Envenomed Thorn to drag down their enemies in death but there seemed no Eldar dead save those who bore the Thorns. Back to the wall, his cold eyes swept over the carpet of corpses as he tried to determine how the assault had been sprung, how over a hundred Kabalite warriors had died in the space of less than a Commorragh night.

They came through the doorway, though not dramatically kicked open, the wide double-door that lead into the main feasting hall was at least ajar; *and the Thorns waited to impale them*. The overturned tables and arsenal of weapons now lying caked in their bearers' gore was testament to that, but after those revelations the picture was either unclear or, even to eyes used to seeing through the veil of Trueborn politicking, unbelievable. Whatever had done this, whatever force had decimated these warriors should have been ripped asunder as it stormed the narrow aperture into the room, but apart from one or two fragments peppering the walls it seemed virtually none of the Kabal had gotten a shot off. *A poison, or toxin to make them all mad – could the Queens' handmaidens have turned?*; he wouldn't have put it past them, though the twins of the Lhamaean sect had never given any hint of plotting against the mistress they attended with simpering devotion. Kaldaz had never uncovered how the Queen of Thorns had come to possess two members of one of Commorragh's most prized cults but then again he had never looked too deeply; he'd had no wish to lose his curiosity by losing his head.

However even the poison-mistresses, the two who granted the Fist of Thorns its venom; they could not have done this alone. The congealed blood also ruled out mandrake involvement; if the shadowed brotherhood had hunted here Kaldaz would have been skating on a rink of frozen blood; so then what? The handmaidens of She-Who-Thirsts, drawn by the excess celebration of the Kabal; *it would explain the lack of enemy dead*; striding slowly and carefully up to one of the overturned tables, the first-barb reached down to roll over one of the warriors that had defended it before recoiling as his dreaded suspicions were confirmed; *but not this. No true Eldar would willingly throw himself into hell without dragging an escort with him*; suicide amongst his people was unheard of, though a few dead here with holes in their backs showed some had been helped their way by their fellows even in a life-or-death struggle. The body he had flipped and the one it hidden underneath it, however, had died by the knives still held in grips that would never slacken.

That heartbeat where the opened throat of his former Kabalite smiled up at him almost persuaded the first-barb to leave and never return. Whatever had happened here was a rite unspeakable even to a race gorged upon suffering; the knife still slick with its owners' blood proved whatever had toppled the Envenomed Thorn was not of the Dark City. Whether hired, or summoned, by rivals was immaterial; anything that could provoke terror, for again blank-eyed gazes were echoed across the dead faces here, profound enough to make the thirsting god's stomach a refuge was something unknown. *Or at least unknown to me, the vat-born*; he stood, the handles of his klaive dampening with sweat as he gritted his teeth against both fear and unfairness; *I don't know, would likely never be told the truth if this was an attack. There is only one route to that knowledge*; the full weight of enormity settled in his gut like ice; now, too late, he knew why Kaleena still whimpered through his implant, why her soul was being dangled before him.

Even with the Queen of Thorns gone he was not the leader, merely the led.

He breathed, in and out, taking in the noxious perfume of the slaughterhouse before rising to his feet once more. Balancing *Scorn* across his shoulder he also balanced the truth, that his life or death would be dictated by the whim of someone other than him. He would never be free; even if he refused the bait Kaleena would be replaced by another Trueborn leader, the Thorn by another Kabal – only now, here and now, could he give his empty life meaning. What or whoever had broken this Kabal lay in wait, using the voice of his former mistress as the crude *mon-keigh* ships stumbled through the Cursed Realm, piteously mewling for the corpse-gods' light. The choice was stark; flee and survive or to go forwards, fight and either die or, if his skill was enough, survive with the truth of this strange, potent force.

The two halves warred within his soul, the greed and hunger for power inherent to his race matching the urge for self-preservation of all mortal beings. Kaldaz remained still for several heartbeats, his breathing the only noise in this rank mausoleum, before standing to his full height and stepping deeper into the Root. What made him take that step, and the rest that followed it, was a potent mix of desire for this newly-revealed weapon, a supreme confidence in his own skill and, perhaps even unacknowledged by Kaldaz himself, a sudden thirst for new knowledge, for novel experience. Obsession had ever been the doom of the *Eldarith* and this enticement of a novel sensation was irresistible; jaded by a life of excess since he'd crawled from the birthing pits, the temptation of the unknown was too sharp a hook to wriggle from.

Thus impaled, he swept down the deserted corridors, not sparing a glance for the dead slaves and Kabalites that periodically slumped in patches of shadow. Only knowledge relevant, such as how the chattel had been slain cleanly while the Kabalites had been more badly brutalised; in one case vaporised from the waist up; caught his scrutiny. Leaving bloody footprints, Kaldaz halted only

when the agonised whimpering that had plagued him the whole way rang in both ears rather than just his right. Glancing at the doors that led to the dragons' court he first missed her in the darkness; only when a shadow moved did he look up and see the Queen of Thorns. He had often imagined how it would end, what would finally doom a Dark Eldar such as Kaleena. Hate her as he did Kaldaz could not deny she'd been both an effective leader and a fighter peerless within the ranks of the Envenomed Thorn; therefore seeing her now hanging broken before her own council chambers, wasn't quite the spectacle of vindication and spiteful revenge he'd thought it would be.

It was so much sweeter than that.

If the tool that did this wasn't our kind then it was moulded or wielded by our hands; the first-barbs' thoughts brought a cold smirk as he admired his former leader. Pinioned so that her spine ran parallel between the double doors with her arms and back impaled on the gateway's embellished iron thorns the dracon clung stubbornly to life, gasping and sobbing as Kaldaz had heard throughout his journey, and for good reason. Rather than rope Kaleena was half-suspended by her own favoured weapon, the agoniser known as the Fist of Thorns. A multi-tasselled whip studded with countless monomolecular hooks, he had seen her flay an orks' hide with one deft flick of her wrist, the prey immobilised as the parasitic weapon enmeshed with their nervous system, flooding it with pain no mortal prey could ever conquer.

Now Kaleena was the prey, constricted by the agoniser and crucified with her arms stretched to breaking point across the doors; that fact as much as the ominous foreboding rearing in his mind told Kaldaz where the foetid secret lay. The slayer of the Envenomed Thorn now sat atop its throne, its former occupant hung across the entrance to his realm; at any time he could end her life by leaving the site of his conquest. *Or I could end it, going in...;*

"Your orders my queen?" Kaldaz spoke to the dangling, broken puppet, eyes glittering in malice as he breathed in her suffering deeply, a honeyed nectar before a possible, likely final fight, "oh but of course, I could not embarrass you before this most esteemed guest by seeking to walk amongst true-kin as an equal. I'll use the servant's entrance".

With that he left her, the pain-wracked gargling dimming as he located one of the smaller, more crudely carved tunnels that flanked the main door. Meant for slaves to enter the Queens' throne room Kaldaz had used them more times than he could remember – unless part of Kaleena's retinue, it was forbidden for vat-born to step through the thorned gates. This time, however, there was no bitterness corroding his heart as several of the fine blades mounted in the tunnel wall broke against his armour or sliced tiny, freely-bleeding wounds in his exposed flesh. Even as a trickle of gore snaked warmly down his cheek the first-barb smiled in malevolence, remembering the last

sight of his dracon as fondly as he did claiming *Scorn*. He might well die in the next few moments, but at least his killer had had the curtesy to let him die grinning.

It was a grin that only widened as he emerged in the throne room shadows, almost having to force himself forwards against a feeling of... of something he couldn't quite place. It wasn't fear, or dread exactly; it was similar yet at the same time distinctive, novel but, unlike most other experiences, unwelcome rather than savoured. The sight of the corpulent corpse hanging from its anti-grav plinth like an overripe bile-fruit, however, was cheer enough for a few steps. The court members, like their former master and their soldiers, were dead, slain where they lay on pleasure-benches and recliners, their pleasure-slaves entwined with their owners even in death. Wetting dry lips the first-barb shot a venomous sneer at the headless body of Xonithos, who had most despised seeing the Kabal's finest blade in the hands of a mere Kabalite. His one ear picked out breath, breaths, at least two living beings in this court of cadavers. The wall of near-silence and that other, nameless sensation closed around him as he moved from behind Xonithos' dais, *Scorn* held covering as much of his body as the wide blade could obscure. When he wasn't immediately shot dead he risked a glance, no more than that, towards the throne Kaleena had demanded fashioned from the carapace of the revolting space-beetle that remained her largest ever kill. That throne was occupied, Kaldaz's single glance had seen that just as it had seen the hand clamped around the nape of one of the twins' necks, the Lhamaean's fellow handmaiden sprawled face-down on her left side,

"Dread dracon", Kaldaz's voice was drenched in respect, not a hint of hatred or disquiet flavouring his tone as he honoured a new leader, "the Envenomed Thorn is yours. This unworthy one pledges his blade t..."

He broke off, stuttering at the laughter that echoed from the throne. Mockery itself was not unexpected; anything beyond being shot on sight was an improvement from his worst expectations; but the voice that issued forwards was not, could not have issued from an Eldar's throat. Protocol abandoned in disgust Kaldaz jumped backwards with his blade bared and ready, staring at the usurper with undisguised loathing flashing in his eyes,

"Mon-keigh!"

"Yes, or perhaps no – that would depend on what maketh a man".

Kaldaz's jaw worked soundlessly, the sight of mere chattel claiming a seat of *Eldarith* power, his hand upon an *Eldarith* woman kindling hatred and shock that would have overwhelmed a lesser species. His rage was deeper, purer than anything felt by a mere human and it granted him strength now; his heart pounding adrenaline and less savoury chemicals through his blood he tensed to spring before a sudden flash of heat threw him backwards. Face flushed from the

weapons' discharge he blinked the after-image from his eyes, staring at the new hole punched in the floor of the former factory as his sight returned fully,

"Hold", the *mon-keigh* commanded, a fusion pistol that hadn't been there a heartbeat ago in its free hand as it leant forwards, one eye hidden by some crude attachment bolted to the side of its ungainly head, "I've had my fill of killing, for the moment at least. You've come a long way first-barb Kaldaz; oh yes, your mistress told me all about you while we were, ah, getting acquainted with her whip and barbs; don't you want to know why?" Kaldaz thought for several seconds before a sudden realisation struck him; *there are no other slaves here, he or his minions killed them all – that means...*;

"You speak our tongue!"

"You can hardly call it 'your' tongue Kaldaz; if you will insist on carving it into the people you meet on your raids you shouldn't be surprised when others pick it up". The first-barb shook his head slightly, not sure he wasn't already dead with the Dark Prince laughing at him before the human continued,

"Still, now you've determined language is no barrier, have you nothing to say? Your former queen didn't cut out your tongue, oh, and I presume you paid your respects on the way in?"

"You presume correctly", he answered carefully, mind whirling; aside from the fusion pistol and the handle of a blade, short and designed for stabbing if the hilt was an indication, at its hip the primitive appeared unarmed; *but the same cannot be said for the allies he may call upon*; "too focussed upon pain of the flesh, but acceptable for a first attempt". The beast smiled,

"Ah, excellent, it's always nice for ones' efforts to be complemented by a master". Even speaking to this thing made Kaldaz's guts threaten rebellion; the idea of any *Eldarith*, even weak-willed Craftworld wretches, teaching *mon-keigh* anything was a nauseating thought,

"Where are your minions?" Kaldaz made a show of looking around the True-born tomb, not trusting the meat before him to notice his furtive glances. True to his suspicions the man merely cocked his head, the ugly cranial implant making an already-ungainly appearance even more mockingly comical,

"My, what?"

"Your slaves, the ones you summoned to do this", he gestured towards the dead, "the handmaidens of She-Who-Thirsts, or the warriors of the Skull Lord?"

"She-Who...oh, oh no", Kaldaz was forced to choke on his fury as the shaven ape laughed, "pardon my mirth but, well, you'll soon understand why I'm the last being in the galaxy to strike an oath with the hermaphrodite you and your kind fear so much".

"You say you did all this, alone", Kaldaz's lip curled in derision, "pardon my disbelief but few of your monkey race can match even a Kabalite – I've killed enough of you myself to know that".

"I'm not like most men", it replied easily, "but still, while we have time, unburden yourself first-barb", the creature craned forwards, his Lhamaean captive whimpering as the smile on its lips wasn't reflected by in its single grey eye, "I see your questions from here. Who are you? Where

did you come from – curiosity is your vice *Eldarith*, alongside arrogance”. Kaldaz snorted, grounding *Scorn*’s tip,

“You know us well”, he admitted, noticing the fool had let his weapon sights fall slightly, something he could capitalise on if he were quick enough,

“Not as well as others, those whose actions ended with me sent here”, it replied evenly, turning its full attention to the first-barb, “before I tell you my story though, a question for you. You know of the Imperium of Man, the empire that supplanted your own after the Eye of Terror opened; yes, I know of your Fall and how the fourth Ruinous Power was birthed; to you it is a harvesting ground of weak, helpless humans, fodder to prey upon. But tell me Kaldaz how many planets does it contain, how numerous are its denizens?”

“As many as there are fleas in the beastmasters’ kennels, and I care more for one of those fleas than I do for any million of your kind”.

“Yes, you and every other *Eldarith Ynneas* in this blighted city; you raid, you pillage and you take from our empire to stave off the collapse of your own. You’re a parasite on real-space, uncaring and mocking the works of others; what does it matter that foolish humans build up a world; we’ll let them and then just burn it to the ground, what fun! Look, they rebuild; so like the idiot beasts to endure, almost offer themselves up for the superior race – what matter that ten, twenty raiders are lost each time, it’s a pin-prick to Commoragh’s great forces. What matter that when the cattle are herded some handful of Eldar get left behind, snared in a *mon-keigh* trap?”

Not even fury could banish shock that great; for the first time since he’d claimed it the first-barb’s grip of *Scorn* slipped as cold numbness percolated through him. The idea, even the edge of the idea that *mon-keigh* could outwit *Eldarith Ynneas* one that he could not countenance beyond a flat, vehement question,

“What?”

“Amongst the billions of humanity”, it answered with the slightest teasing lilt in its tone, “there are those who work in shadows, guiding the Imperium in this eternal war. They hunt monsters and worse than monsters; to quote an old saying, they gaze into the abyss and in its turn the abyss gazes into them – only the truly worthy survive. One of this select band of brothers and sisters requisitioned a planet; yes, you heard me”, that grey eye smouldered with challenge and Kaldaz’s knuckles whitened on *Scorns*’ handles, “the Imperium counts planets, not armies or nations, a right you Eldar forfeited long ago. An entire world was given over freely for the good of all mankind; a planet sat, unfortunately, near a dark, unstable region of space, where captains talked in hushed tones of lost ships and hungry void-ghosts. To this world were drafted citizens, people to till near-barren soil and scratch a living digging for scraps of iron and drips of promethium. Some were settlers, normal folk dreaming of a better life, others were prisoners pressed to give their lives for the Emperor’s war machine. Tradesmen, captains, slaves, renegades and deserters, a heady mix on a new frontier; this world turned, the years passed and the population swelled, each new birth

or pair of feet on the ground merely adding bait”, it smiled and this time the cold emotion did reach its eyes, a frigid grimace that almost made Kaldaz glance away, “to tempt the hunters in”.

It would work; the treacherous thought dug a voracious root in his brain but he refused to let it crack his disingenuous facade; *a whole world expanding near to a flesh-port. The local Kabals would soon notice and gather for the hunt – were we amongst them? Is that how this thing washed up on the Malediction?*;

“So then”, the question as surprisingly bitter, “we struck?”

“You did, with all the ferocity and cruelty infamous to your kind. Small-scale raids that disappeared small settlements were constant, larger ones depopulating whole towns and cities as frequent as natural disasters. Countless thousands, Imperial civilians all, were sacrificed to the tender mercies of your race, blood-tribute paid for humanity to earn the most crucial advantage against one of its myriad enemies”.

“And what would your leader pay such a high price for?” Kaldaz listened, partly in genuine interest; *depending on the answer, I could grow wealthy indeed arranging a supply*;

“Knowledge”, the *mon-keigh* answered simply, “so much is unknown in our galaxy, torn from history and scattered to the dust of legend. We have borne your predations for ten thousand years; Promethean legends say one of the Emperors’ own sons confronted you, the dusk-wraiths of Nocturne. We have borne such pain because we couldn’t stop it; we can beat you force against force; please don’t scoff, I’ve seen it done; but you *Eldarith Ynneas* never strike our armies unless desperate. You seek the helpless, the weak; all we, or she to give credit where it’s due, did was grant your softer target an unexpected sting in the tail. Throughout the population of the wretched planet were seeded those who were... different, shall we say?” Kaldaz didn’t miss the *mon-keigh*’s flicker of disquiet before it went on,

“Men trained from infancy to fight, then that training was buried deep within them, allowing them to live normal lives, move amongst men unseen. Until that life was shattered by your kind and they were confronted with the enemy; then all the false memories, the other persona implanted by hypnosis and wyrd-suggestion, all of that”, it brushed its hand together, “simply melted away. They died, most of them, or were taken, but their small victories granted us the knowledge so desperately sought”.

“Our weapons, vehicles, crafts of war”, Kaldaz hazarded a guess, knowing full well that *mon-keigh* equipment was crude and noisy, though still dangerous. If what this ape said was true, that somewhere in the galaxy his masters were obtaining *Eldarith Ynneas* firearms... a slave with a whip was lumbering and stupid, but the whip commanded respect nonetheless,

“No, a prosperous side-effect for the Adeptus Mechanicus involved but no, your toys were never her main goal. Orders were to capture, never to kill”, once more the human laughed and Kaldaz snarled, cursing the miserable wretch he still held for not stabbing him with one of the innumerable poisoned needles concealed in her hair and robes. Only when he saw her face, as

slack as the Sawbones had been, did he realise she was effectively dead, the same force that had wiped out the Kabal breaking her mind, sanity and resistance. Seeing his gaze reflected in her lifeless eyes the first-barb looked contemptuously away from the weak-willed fool to hear the next words in this strange, rambling tale,

“Knowledge, as I’m sure you know, can be taken from the dead even by we clumsy, stumbling humans but it’s much easier to extract from a living mind. The raiders were beaten unconscious, their bodies hidden and all evidence of their existence removed – it was only then, in her moment of triumph, that our illustrious visionary met a new, unexpected problem. She was so close to her goal but thwarted by one simple fact about her new prisoners”, once more the grey eye locked with Kaldaz’s own, each finding the other unworthy, “you *Eldarith Ynneas* do not break to the lash, or the knife or any coercion”. Kaldaz gave a harsh, sharp rasp of laughter,

“As if any would; even the weaklings of the Craftworlds or the Exodite peasants can resist *mon-keigh* barbarism”.

“Perhaps resist it but you, you of all Eldar – you *enjoy* it”, the chattel riposted smoothly, his smirk highlighting the bared half-skull clamped on his face like a mind-vice, “you care not where the pain comes from as long as you can feed from it. Brands and irons, even explicating your minds merely nourishes your soul even as it destroys your bodies. So she was left with a conundrum; how to make masochists talk? Fortunately the resources of the Imperium are near-infinite and all of them were at her disposal – she soon had her answer”, it paused, leaning forwards again,

“She sent for me”.

“You”, Kaldaz echoed, lip curling derisively, “pardon my arrogance, or don’t, but I’ve seen wretches more threatening than you”.

“I was a little different then I will admit; in fact everything I am now I owe to your kin, a debt I can never truly pay”, Kaldaz was beginning to suspect the human was as insane as Kaleena had been though it spoke again before he could ponder it, “but before that change occurred I was sent for and I did my duty. I followed my orders to the letter; rebellion isn’t in our nature; and your kind broke before me. How long this went on for I cannot say – I remember little before one particular day that liberated me forever even as it spells doom for humanity’s opposition. I was summoned to a prisoner, category alpha majoris – as you would never sully your tongue with Gothic I’ll tell you that means highest priority, the ultimate prize”.

“An archon?” The beast shook its badly-armoured head,

“Alpha minoris, sweet meat certainly but lacking what my, ah, inquisitive commander required. No, one of your elders was taken, a survivor from before the Fall itself so he boasted”, a cold, calculating fire was kindling, slow passion simmering to a boil as its owner went on, “even as he languished in his cell he laughed, confident he would tell us nothing. He would be reborn, he said, his soul would leave his body only to inhabit another flesh-shell within the confines of

Commorragh. Then I went to him, showed him the truth of his situation and soon all the Imperium's enemies will know of that enlightenment".

He couldn't decide the greater torment; the living insult perched on his throne or the sense of smug superiority the *mon-keigh* radiated, as though it had a right to be there. Kaldaz was not close enough to end this farce, not yet, but he was closing, movements so incidental only another *Eldarith* would notice bringing him closer to striking distance as the witless thing babbled on,

"One of your eldest, the most perverse and pitiful creatures amongst an entire race of vampiric soul-feeders; oh the talks we had, the things he said and promised to keep me at arm's length. With me, if not by her side, then at least in her shadow she had the knowledge she wanted at last, and what knowledge", its fist sank into its cheek as it lounged, though it never looked away from the first-barb, "the first minutes of her conversation with the 'Haemonculus' will shake the galaxy as nothing has since the Arch-Traitor revealed his hand ten millennia ago. We know now why you're not yet dead", the sudden fixing of its monovision stalled Kaldaz's advance, "we know of your kind".

"As you have said before", he sneered, measuring the distance with his eyes and realising a few more heartbeats would see him close enough, "you and your mistress captured a Haemonculus. Well done; lock ten thousand orks in a torture chamber and eventually they'll carve all Thousand and Six forbidden pleasures upon each other – how is your pitiful achievement any different from that pointless, if amusing folly?"

"Because I wasn't talking about the *Ynneas Eldarith* Kaldaz", the humans' gaze was unwavering, "I was talking about you, you and those of your ilk. We know of the vat-born and the secret of your creation".

For a heartbeat the first-barb did not understand; only then did panic sink icicle fangs into his marrow, terror clamp a dead hand around his heart as his mercurial mind translated that fact. *The mon-keigh, already they breed like rats*; Eldar lives, even for those of his hedonistic bent, were long and complicated, ill-given to rapid population expansion, hence the vat-born existing at all; *without us Commorragh would fall into cannibalism. There aren't enough True-born to hunt their own prey – they need us! Younger, less gripped by She-Who-Thirsts to drag tribute to their halls! Our own path, culling the lesser Kabals and attrition from raiding keep our numbers in check – if the mon-keigh...*;

"Yes", the slow, almost sultry drawl broke into his thoughts like an axe blade, "many of the Imperium's greatest asked how a supposedly dying race could sustain the losses you take dancing through this galaxy of flames. Your kin in their world-ships fight only when their seers tell them they must but you, the Eldar pirates, are forever snapping at our heels, bleeding our worlds dry. You against the Imperium should be a knife against a grindstone; yes you scour us deeply but,

eventually, should be ground to nothing. Now the secret is out", it grinned, the expression made ghastly by the message behind it,

"He betrayed you, your eldest craftsman; for his miserable soul he surrendered you all; the knowledge is already disseminated to interested ears. The Flensed, the Kabal of the Bones and ten, twenty others were crafted from his flesh-melding laboratories, laboratories now being recreated across Imperial space after the first trials bore fruit and the first infant cried. The xenos taint is purged, the Adeptus Biologus have recreated the *ex vitro* uteri as their Mechanicus brethren break down the dark-matter generators of your dark lances and blasters. It takes decades, twenty Terran years at least for most worlds to raise a regiment in His glorious name..." The grey eye had never wavered, fanaticism gleaming in its depths, zealotry burning as it hissed its last words,

"...with the help your elder oh-so generously provided, that will be cut to *years!*"

He could see it; that was the most damning fact. He could sneer and pour scorn but if the creature before him spoke the truth the galaxy was changing forever. The Imperium was vast, perhaps vaster than their own empire had been and, though hopelessly backwards, if they attained the numbers afforded by quasi-forbidden biomancy and weapons stolen from the *Eldarith*, the *mon-keigh* were no longer prey, could no longer be considered playthings...

...they were a *threat!* A threat that could extinguish the *Eldarith* entirely!

He swallowed shallowly, thoughts of an Imperium resurgent shadowing his thoughts; his kind flourished in endless war picking and choosing their battles – if what this shaven ape was saying was true those times could be ended under humanity's boot. If the *mon-keigh* could now replicate themselves eventually their armies would smother all others, even the witless greenskins or the alien space parasites. The vat-born of Commorragh were controlled, their lives carefully cultivated and, if necessary or convenient, pruned, but humans would have no such scruples. It would take time, centuries even, but eventually numbers would tell; enemies would be overwhelmed by the pink tide until the galaxy cooled, the flames of war died and with them the anonymity of the Dark City's raiding ports. Without lesser squabbles to hide behind only planetary assaults or convoy ambushes could feed the slave-pens, massive outright attacks that would inevitably draw the ire of the Imperial dreadnaught. Eyes would fall on their raiding patterns, countermeasures adopted; Commorraghs' blood-line would slow to a trickle or, worse, dry up...

"You lie!" Kaldaz shouted, echoing around the court of the dead, "You *mon-keigh*, you haven't the wit or the power to break a Haemonculus, it's beyond even us! You are a liar, a deceiver sitting on a throne that rejects you and speaking to one who should sew his ears shut rather than heed you any further!"

"Speak to me of lies when your anger fully covers your fear", it answered, gloating, "what you believe is immaterial; one of us knows the truth, the other suspects and takes fright at it. Anyway, I

myself no longer care for the Imperium's future – I am here on this throne, which I'd remind you I took from your strongest warrior, for two entwined reasons".

It stood, dragging its captive to the tip of her knees, still looking down at the last surviving member of the Envenomed Thorn. Taking in his enemy Kaldaz had time to note it was shorter than him but slightly broader, and its sword was indeed a short, stabbing weapon lacking both the weight and reach of *Scorn* before something happened that took even him, an *Eldarith Ynneas*, aback. The creature gave a low approximation of a traditional Eldar bow, a caricature of proper form as it spoke from the uncomfortable position, not dropping its gaze,

"I am here to offer the Kabals of Commorragh and those that rule them my deepest and eternal gratitude".

"What is...", Kaldaz's tongue couldn't grapple the word, one he suspected the *mon-keigh* had made up, "...gratitude?" The human stood from its bow far too early to be deemed polite, brow furrowed before illumination dawned,

"Ah, of course, you have no term for mere *mon-keigh* would call thankfulness, or love, or any happier state of being. Consider gratitude as... I would delay killing you for an eternity, at least if orders and my own needs didn't demand it happen sooner", its gaze was suddenly hungry even as Kaldaz smirked, hoping to goad the alien into a rash attack that would see it gutted, "I owe your evil kind for granting me and those of my ilk something almost lost in this era of war, rarer than even knowledge". It fell silent, no doubt hoping Kaldaz would ask but the first-barb refused to rise to the bait, resuming his previous imperceptible advance in silence; not seeing its doom creeping forwards, the human sighed regretfully,

"And I believed your kind had a sense of the dramatic? Still, silent or speaking matters little as long as you listen – I find it so engaging to have an audience after not knowing what one was. Still, where was I; ah yes, hope", it declared suddenly, Kaldaz struggling to understand the word beyond something the other races possessed, something delicious to crush from their still-living bodies, "hope was the gift of the *Ynneas Eldarith* to me".

Kaldaz had no choice; the silent walls echoed with harsh, barking laughter, *Scorn's* tip gouging the perfect floor as the first-barb leant on it, his scornful eyes flaying the babbling alien as mercilessly as the Fist of Thorns gouged his former mistress,

"You truly are mad", he shook his head in amusement, "touched and used as a vessel for She-Who-Thirsts; only the hell-realm could break you so badly. This is Commorragh *mon-keigh*, seat of our power since before your ancestors were vomited forth from the slime they've wallowed in since. We don't sow, we reap; all that is is ours, you are merely too blind to see that or too stupid to understand it. We give the younger races all they deserve – *nothing*", he spat venomously, lip curling, "least of all hope".

"Yet you did, or one of you did; the elder, your Haemonculus I mentioned earlier, he gave the entire Imperium many things. Not freely, granted, and certainly cursing every heartbeat he was stood in my shadow, but give them he did. He gave us his knowledge, an understanding of your race and their hidden gems and it was one of those, a mere trinket of alpha minoris target, that granted me hope before I even understood what hope was".

Kaldaz could scarcely hold in a hiss of glee as the mad puppet turned its head, actually *looked away* from him – in the space between heartbeats he was almost within striking range. The *mon-keigh* could see him in its peripheral vision but that was immaterial; it would be unable to even register the quickness of his hand when the kill dangled before him so alluringly. He glanced again, enhanced vision picking out veins pulsing beneath fragile flesh, then something else, grafted into the aliens' bizarre headgear caught his eye. *Those are...*; and they were, carved runes of the *Eldarith* tongue, wards of entrapment if he was reading them correctly. Pausing at this new abomination the first-barb tensed, stimulant tickling through his blood as the current king spoke again, the servile wrench held in his clawed hand still snivelling uselessly,

"I was never told what this thing truly is; the eldest would identify it only as an 'essence chamber' when he inspected our gallant inquisitor's haul, me dogging his heels. I, or at least 'I' as I was then, couldn't care but any scraps of knowledge, even an untrue name, glut the ravenous in this degenerate age. The one who... handled me, I suppose; he was very interested in this chamber and its purpose. I became aware only much later, only after ancient channels of communication had been opened and he had spread the word. I was informed only that I was to be an experiment, an attempt to create a more effective killer by undoing the unpleasant side-effects of my state. I agreed; of course I did, I knew rebellion only as a word in a dictionary; only when the surgery was complete, this cursed xenograft fused onto my more traditional headgear did I see the truth. At my first kill", the creature shuddered as though enraptured, the motion too brief for Kaldaz to spring, "only then did I feel what had always been missing, what life had denied me".

"Aside from sanity, breeding and any hope of improvement upon your pitiful lot?" Kaldaz snorted. The corner of his last opponent's lips quirked and it might have smiled before its tone changed to wearied explanation,

"You mock because you do not and cannot understand", it sighed, scratching its cheek with the barrel of the fusion pistol it still held, an action that had Kaldaz stall for a moment; even an ungraceful human would aim and fire before *Scorn* could feast and that weapon was nothing if not indiscriminate at short range, "but I will try to enlighten you. Imagine being locked for your entire life in a lightless, airless tomb; no, better, a cage, a cage of thick glass you can barely see through. You grow up within this bubble, seeing nothing but vague smears through the walls of the glass and pushing these smears away as you approach them. The cage is big but all-enclosing; it will let no-one in but it is all you know so you are content. You live within the cage for forever, knowing nothing of the worlds outside save the ghosts at the windows of your prison. Now tell me...", the

human whipped towards him so quickly Kaldaz missed the motion, almost stumbling back a pace as the beasts' gaze transfixed him,

"...What would happen if someone broke that cage, set you free into the world? As I said", it went on after a heartbeat of silence, seeing the first-barb's confounded expression through a narrowed grey eye, "you cannot understand the cage, the hell I have endured since I was birthed to the Imperium's service. But I can show you, as easily as I see your attempts to creep close enough to hack me down. You call me *mon-keigh*, you are wrong Kaldaz – I am no human!"

His kind were birthed in shadow, not as dark as that which shrouded the night-skinned mandrakes, but dark enough to ensure all *Ynneas Eldarith* had eyes to pierce twilight's murk. Kaleena had robbed him of an ear but his sight was untouched; that leniency let him to notice a slight light suddenly erupt from around human's covered eye. Even before he registered this he was in motion, body flooded with enough narcotics to fell an ork and *Scorn* transformed to a silver blur as he sprang. Mind lost amid rapture, a vehement need for slaughter the likes of which the lesser races would never know, Kaldaz was in flight when something defying his knowledge was issued into being by the alien's corrupted helm. It was there and gone, sinking through one of the corpses nearby like a dagger through a virgin throat even as the first-barbs' bloodlust, along with all else, was utterly ripped away.

All that remained was nothing.

Despair, isolation and terror were sweet-meats to Commorrhagh's children; the alien blankness that drowned him in ice was none of them; not a single one of the emotions he had long suckled upon exited in that entombing void. Terror, or something like but infinitely more potent than it swept over him, the first-barb unable to think to defend himself as he was rendered unable to think at all. Only the non-being existed; he might have fallen to his knees, klaive clattering to the floor as his single functioning ear heard screaming, probably his own, and beyond that an incoherent shriek of animal suffering being drowned out by the *mon-keigh's* voice now roaring out a terrible greeting,

"I am that which should never be but is, born within the Emperor's domain but forever beyond His light. I am unseen and unlooked for, unknown and wished forgotten; I am the hand on the *Eldarith* throat, the void the Hive Mind shies from, the darkness even demon-kin dare not approach. I know no fear for I *am* fear...!"

The pressure lessened fractionally and Kaldaz gasped, red stars bursting in his vision as he fought back from the brink of asphyxiation. Focussing on an eerie, ethereal light that still hung before his watering eyes the first-barb was transfixed by the morbid sight atop the dais. The Lhamaean wretch was silent, blood from shredded vocal chords flecking her lips as her eyes rolled back, milky whiteness exposed. The *mon-keigh* was lost in some savage, feral bliss, his face a terrifying snarl

as he glared at both his victim and the first-barb now knelt before him. Kaldaz matched his gaze for less than a heartbeat; something vital, something visceral deep within him *forced* him to look away, unwilling to risk the red glow erupting from the perverted essence chamber. Instead, mind thawing as the tide of oblivion receded, he noticed the flickering around the back of the surely-dying woman's neck, the same energy the *mon-keigh* had expelled now reaped from another. It ended suddenly, like a whip being cracked; with a muffled thump the dead flesh-sack tumbled down, joining her sister in death as the bale eye closed. As it did and the lingering claws at the back of Kaldaz's mind finally ceased worrying his sanity the human gasped, loud as a thunderclap in the silence before regarding the kneeling Kaldaz again, his voice no longer loud but measured, threatening and all the more powerful for it,

"...I am protophage CCIXV-Omega, formerly of the Culexus temple, and I am your end".

Kaldaz did not doubt that, couldn't doubt it; whatever eldritch abomination the human had summoned was not something that could be fought. Muscles cramped and fingers trembling the first-barb reached for *Scorn*, the klaive heavy but lifted nonetheless; he refused to greet damnation without a blade in his hands. He gritted his teeth, denying his pain through willpower alone as he struggled upright, sweat chafing the inside of his armour as he panted his question,

"What was that? What thing are you that the *mon-keigh* hold sway over – what *are* you?"

"One in a billion billion", the answer came back laced with superiority, the prey the first-barb had stalked now smiling with a predator's fangs, "damned by my own lineage. I was born; no, I wasn't even born, one of the few reasons I and I alone in this galaxy could hold pity for one such as you; I was created as you were, as a weapon and nothing else. I said before the Imperium lacked the means to create vat-born, in that I lied – it is just so, so rare and expensive it can only be reserved for the rarest of subjects, when all other means are exhausted", the narrow face pinched into a scowl, a memory caressing the *mon-keigh's* mind as he spat the last words venomously, "only in the Culexus temple, my temple, is such archeotech employed".

"To create you", the thought of the brutish Imperium fashioning such a living blade Kaldaz's blood run cold, "to create a monster..."

"Have a care", the thing suddenly growled, Kaldaz leaping backwards in case it deployed its strange powers again, "who you call monster Eldar. You look upon me seeing only a weapon or an abomination just like my former masters did – I look upon you and see a mirror! You, you and all your brothers in this webway catacomb, all damned by the god you created. She has claim over your souls, shaving off a sliver every day and the galaxy had bled for your ancient folly ever since. Answer me this, as one who'd slay a thousand of his fellows if it meant his own precious soul stayed out of Her gullet a heartbeat longer – if you would to such lengths to save your soul, how far do you think could someone who'd never had one go to possess and keep one?"

He didn't understand the question and, for once, his expression betrayed him; with a sigh that expelled its remaining anger the human slumped upon the throne again, likely bloodying itself on the engraved thistles there but seemingly inured to the pain as it explained,

"You know of blood, of the genes my race and yours has and can, if pushed, share", Kaldaz didn't even hide his distaste; though there were rumours of such half-breeds; indeed not long ago all of Commorragh had been aflame with rumours of a Craftworld farseer mothering such a spawn with a *mon-keigh* lover; he paid them little mind, "my monstrosity is found there, within my very being. The Pariah gene; a curse, an abomination that should not be. By the Emperor's mercy it's rare, only one in a billion of us possess such a gene. Those one in a billion, the blanks or pariahs, theirs is a miserable life – immune to the Warp and its denizens but shunned, reviled by normal people, betrayed by their lack of presence in the Immaterium. Even those with no psychic potential know of the Pariah gene; as a blind man would avoid a biting cold wind they avoid those whose genetic make-up forbids them a soul! Pariahs have no presence in the Warp; they are nothing, empty vessels for the tides of the Immaterium to flow through and all who come close to them know it. Alone, unloved and scorned by their own species, that is the fate of those who bear a Pariah gene", Kaldaz stiffened, ready to hurl himself aside at the slightest hint of red as the human looked directly at him again,

"So what do you think awaits those bearing two copies?"

"Two, copies?" Kaldaz repeated the last words slowly, fighting down the tide of horror welling up from within, "You?"

"Me", it confirmed with a nod, "the struggles of a Pariah are nothing, nothing when set against those of a Blacksoul; the first gene forbids a soul, the second denies humanity itself! We few, we damned few, we feel nothing – the Warp and all within it, hope, rage, fear, all are lost to us, a font we can never drink from. But the Imperium was ever resourceful and it took us, those who share Man's face but not his soul, and the ultimate loss was turned into an unconquerable strength. We rose beyond the shadows, in the utter twilight; the foot-soldiers of the Culexus".

"You lie!" Kaldaz spat, piecing together the clues he was dropped, "I have seen those claimed by She-Who-Thirsts; at her last caress they die without exception! To live as you claim is, devoid of, of *everything* – it is impossible!"

"Then before you sits impossibility", it shrugged, seemingly uncaring if its madness was believed or not, "and those wretches that died as the Warp pulled their souls free should be grateful. You fear death Eldar, you fear your afterlife and the torments that await you there – speak not to me of torment. To be a Blacksoul, to be Culexus; to live every day in training and service to the Golden Throne, to give your blood, your sweat, your seed and your life to a humanity that rejects you; that is hell. A hell made all the bitter to me who escaped it because, until that day, until the minute of my first kill following this essence chamber being grafted to my skull, I had no clue that I was ever trapped. Only when the cage broke, when the walls came down", it stopped,

having to swallow a sudden tremor and blink several times, unpleasant memories surfacing, “only then, too late, did I understand the horror I am”.

If I had not moved back, Kaldaz cursed his cowardice; had he not stumbled that precious footstep he could have struck down this unhappy thing that claimed to be both living and dead. But he still breathed, his heart still beat – while that continued he had a chance to best this so-called assassin and take a most unusual skull for his tally,

“You said about a cage before”, he ventured, seeking to buy time, “are you, Blacksouls”, the word was unfamiliar, “caged when not put to hunt?”

“No, we are caged forever”, the *mon-keigh* gave a sad, almost watery smile, deep with regret, “we feel nothing, our very DNA prevents it. To have not just no soul, but to be denied everything, every sensation, every emotion, every scrap of life that makes existence bearable in this damned galaxy. I k,killed”, it hiccupped, nascent emotions threatening to overwhelm it before it swallowed them down and carried on, “killed seven others, seven of my cadre before I was fifteen Terran years old; the weak cannot serve, the mantra of the taskmasters. Boys and girls I had grown up with, trained and bled with, dead by my hand and I felt nothing, not even pride at surviving. When I passed, began my active service I couldn’t comprehend the sins I committed for the Officio Assassinorum; I strangled children to ensure they couldn’t give my position away, torched infirmaries for distractions and killed, oh how many I killed in His name. Xenos, mostly your Craftworld cousins who curse and fear us perhaps more than your slaving god, and humans fallen to Warp possession. And then this”, it jerked a thumb towards the caged essence chamber, “my Custodian, Guardian of my Eye arranged the contact, the Adeptus Mechanicus sworn to our temple created this abomination and I, protophage, human clone and lowest of assassins was ordered to trial it. I obeyed; I was ingrained to obey; I slew the prisoner the brought me, his soul was trapped in this chamber and became my own, however briefly. The cage was broken; I knew, truly knew all the monstrosities I had done, and I screamed...”

Memories from before he became first-barb swam up behind Kaldaz’s eyes; he had heard the screams of the soulless before whilst manning the towers the *mon-keigh* had repainted in blood. The dispossessed, dragged unwillingly by their need to the Wall of Thorns, had screamed even as the splinter fire tore them asunder, the torment of their withered souls disregarding their fear of death and damnation eternal. Even considering the atrophied emotions of *mon-keigh*, for one who had been denied such sensation for years, even decades...

“You couldn’t control it”, he stated aloud, not sure if scorn or pity dominated his tone, “you felt the joy of the kill and it broke you”. The grey eye snapped upon him, cold and hard as a gemstone, reminisced sorrow abandoned in favour of rekindled wrath,

“You sicken me, you and all your debased, poisonous kind. You would do the things I’ve done and feel nothing save pride”, it spat, the insult making the first-barbs’ lip curl but he contained

himself, recalling what had happened the last time this dead thing was roused to ire, “and now you assume I’m as twisted as you are. There was no pride, no joy in my mind, there was only guilt and utter, depthless remorse. It was those that that broke me, the sickening realisation of the heinous things I’d done in the Emperor’s name that made me, a Blacksoul, scream. I do not remember the aftermath, a blur of noise and colour; only when that first soul was expended and I shackled back in the prison of my own genome did I see what I’d done. The one thing forbidden to all Culexus, the single target we can never slay lay dead at my feet; my Custodian, a blank who had known me from infancy was slain by my hand and, again bereft of a soul, I felt nothing. I should never have come out of the cage”, it said regretfully, shaking its head, “it was too late for me to be set free; for that mistake an innocent man paid with his life”. Kaldaz snorted,

“Innocent; after unleashing you on the galaxy? That is no innocent”.

“Perhaps not, but he deserved a better end than murder by his charge”, the assassin countered, still seated, “but it was done, and nothing would restore him to being. I had committed offence against my temple; there could be no excuses. I knew the creed of the Culexus and, soulless again, had no fear; I retreated to my quarters and prepared quietly for my end. I would have either waited for death at the hand of my superiors or starved waiting for it had not the orchestrator of the entire, insidious project approached my temple with a counter-offer, one I knew nothing of. She came to me, a *Ynneas Eldarith* bound and drugged by her side, and through the shielding that allows non-Pariahs to abide our presence she talked. I had memories of my bout of madness but without a soul to provide emotion they had no meaning, a scene from a life not my own. She who spoke of the power of a soul, a power my xenograft could wield, and how that strength, alien to the Culexus, could see a new era dawn for both Blacksouls and the Imperium if I would delay my required death. I first obeyed because, regardless of my crimes, I was still at her service; when I had taken the Eldar she thrust through the barrier and ‘lived’ once more I agreed without hesitation, accepting her last command”.

“And she sent you to Commorragh?” Kaldaz almost chuckled; truly this inquisitor had a bitter sense of humour. His antagonist, however, didn’t laugh, only growing more resolute as he slowly pulled himself upright,

“She did not send me; I came of my own will to fulfil a bargain, a deal made to see one of the Imperium’s foes weakened, hope granted to my temple and me absolved of my sins. She sent to my quarters prisoners, Eldar and human both, and I tore their souls from them, learnt what it meant to live by stealing minutes and hours from others. Every sensation was new, something to be explored, examined and enraptured by; how long I forced myself through this training, by degrees adapting to the world outside a Blacksouls’ cage I don’t remember. Only when I was ready, when I felt some kind of balance between the living man and the soulless monster did I report for my final task. I accepted it with my own hand, replaced it with my will, the first time a non-blank human being had willingly interacted with me, and when that was done my time within the Culexus temple was over. I will be forgotten, never mentioned upon the roll of our honour, unremembered save for

the legacy the inquisitor would bequeath it, the price she would pay for me to obey her request rather than her order". Kaldaz heard the unvoiced question, thinking hard about what such a thing as this *mon-keigh* could want but ultimately defeated; only when it tilted its head slightly did an icy fist squeeze the first-barb's heart,

"The elder, the Haemonculus ..."

"And now you know", the assassin smiled, a bleak, frozen expression, "he is already en route, escorted by my brethren, and he will spend the rest of his miserable existence forging these essence chambers, soul cages or whatever name he ascribes to them for the Culexus. They will be grafted to our infants, those too young to understand the gift they are receiving, and they will be weaned upon souls even as their bodies are trained to kill. They will live as I and the older ones have never lived and their numbers will grow while he survives. We were ever the smallest temple, one in a billion billion as a baseline with mostly-forgotten prototech to replenish our numbers – with his aid that will not matter..."

"No!"

"Yes!" The *mon-keigh* shouted down the first-barb's vehement denial of his dream, this new dawn for the Imperium's most damned servants, "We will rise Kaldaz, we will rise and smother those who would see the Imperium die! You stare into the abyss and see She-Who-Thirsts staring back at you, hungry – we stare into the abyss and it averts its gaze! We will end the threat of the Warp, force closed the Eye you birthed and every day we will give thanks to you, the *Ynneas Eldarith*, for granting us the means to do so. A new future beckons Kaldaz", it pointed with a single finger, exultation erupting from every pore, "and that future condemns you to history, as you should have been at Her birth!"

"We will hunt you!" The first-barb roared, forgetting his fear in anger's blinding red cloud, "Your temple, the pit where you filth are spawned, it will be found and torched! This I swear..."

"How Kaldaz, how will you hold to that swear?" Its question slashed like a razor-flail, "Our temple is unknown even to the Imperium, it exists outside the light of the Master of Humanity; how will you find it? And before even that", there was a rasp of drawn steel, its blade whispering free of its sheath and pointed directly at the first-barbs' heart, "you and you alone know this secret, the only confidant of the renegade Blacksoul. Heh", it chuckled as a whimsical thought made it leer down at him, "the first *Ynneas Eldarith* fighting for a noble cause against the galaxy's most selfish *mon-keigh* - even you must agree the irony is delicious".

"Not as delicious as your stolen soul will taste, assuming you're a warrior enough to face *Scorn* blade to blade", Kaldaz spat, knowing his only chance was to goad the *mon-keigh* into fighting fairly; *if it deploys that fear again I am forever lost*, "unless your 'gratitude' extends to kneeling for the deathblow?"

"No, it expresses itself in other ways", the human said cryptically before smiling and rolling its shoulders, "still, with your mistress gone I suppose that makes you dracon; congratulations. Sadly

that also makes you a beta minoris target so, as you must realise", it sank into an unfamiliar stance, sword to the rear, the one arm extended, "you're not leaving this room alive".

"Or you're not", the moment, Kaldaz knew, was heartbeats away and he too assumed a fighting stance, *Scorn* a crescent of silver before his body, "so then Blacksoul, my klaive hungers. Come forth and die upon it!"

A single nod, and the human moved faster than he'd believed possible for such an ungainly race; mere seconds later, as the sword wove a net of steel and rang off *Scorns'* honed edge, the first-barb realised his fight was hopeless. The humans gaze was blank, staring into the middle distance as its body dodged, parried and riposted every trick Kaldaz had ever devised with his bonded sword. It had called itself an assassin and that, Kaldaz realised, was the difference; he was vat-born, one of countless scraped from the flesh-labs and thrown onto the vile streets of Commorragh to fight, to bleed and ultimately to survive but the thing he was fighting was a weapon forged, honed and trained relentlessly for a single, simple purpose.

To kill.

Why he was still alive Kaldaz could only guess; the human could have slain him from the first pass, its sword sparking off his gut armour when it should have skewered his bowels. Since then he had been on the defensive and it was inadequate; already he was panting, *Scorn* trembling as he sought to keep the flashing steel from his flesh. It was toying with him, prolonging the torment for some purpose known only to itself; *or at least*, the thought came to him as he bulled forwards, a reckless move but one of few he could make against something that so badly outclassed him; *unknown until it chooses to admit it*. Snatching down a breath as he ducked behind a silent grav-platform, the first-barb trusted his single ear to keep him alive as he called out his last trump card,

"You said you'd kill me assassin but I draw breath", his boast was hollow and both of them knew it, "why fight me *mon-keigh*, why throw away your new life in this bleak hell? Your crime has placed you beyond redemption and your masters have cast you to die here – why dance to their tune when your eyes are open now? I am dracon", that might have been economical with the truth considering most of his Kabal was dead by the hand of the one he now bartered with but he would parry that blade later, "and you, you are a weapon the Dark City has never known. Join me, help me rebuild the Envenomed Thorn; you'll have all the souls you could desire and, though you scoff now, nothing tastes sweeter than revenge on former controllers. Believe me", he continued softly, examining his reflection in the mirror of his klaive, the single syllable of its name encapsulating his hatred of those who would forever sneer down at him, "I know".

"For you", his opponent leapt over the first-barbs' reflexive swipe, cart-wheeling smoothly over Kaldaz's head from atop the grav platform and continuing as the eldar span, *Scorn* in a guard

position; *silent as death, truly the mon-keigh hone great tools*; “that would be true. Your civilisation believes it is based upon vengeance but, to me, revenge is a shadow of the release of absolution”.

“Absolution? For your killing...”

“Of my Custodian”, it finished for him, “I have sinned against my temple and against Him on Terra, a sin that can be cleansed only by blood, my own as well as yours. I am Omega, dead yet walking – this is my last mission, exemplary suicide requested by the Inquisition and approved by the High Lords themselves. To protect the nascent strength of the Imperium and damn one of its enemies to a long death I entered this den of shadows, my last mission to silence those who know the secrets we wrenched from your kind. After all”, it smirked at the understanding dawning horribly on the first-barb’s face, “how long can the Carnival of Pain indulge in its revelry when its ringmasters lie dead?”

“The archons? No”, the realisation made Kaldaz’ flesh creep, “the homunculi”; *they are his targets – he’ll kill them just as he did the Sawbones, and none of their restoration methods will save them*; “you cannot slay them all! They are legion, their servants feel nothing...”

“They will feel me”, the assassin assured him darkly, “closing your eyes doesn’t render you sightless; the *Eldarith* are all touched by the Immaterium far more than man is. I can see the light of your soul, the potential you daren’t acknowledge for fear of the Siren God. Even the most perverse of your flesh-melders can’t restore a soul so what protection will they have from the *other* me, who will follow his mission until the bitterest end? Your kind claim to have mastered death but I am not mere death”, it shook its head slowly, almost regretfully, “I am oblivion, ultimate destruction, and your salvation first-barb”.

“Salvation?” Kaldaz parroted the last word, thinking his opponent misspoke but, seeing it tap just below the implanted essence chamber, the sick hand of dread crawled up his spine again,

“The animus speculum”, it announced, “the weapon of the Culexus, modified in my case but still effective. We, my Blacksoul brethren and I; we are psychic voids and nature, even unnatural nature such as the Warp, detests a void. The Immaterium flows into us and our black-souls consume it, in a way filter it and bleed the harmless energy into real-space. The speculum magnifies and focuses this power, stores the energy we generate to be unleashed as force, power in its purest form. There is no armour proof that protects against it; even displacement fields such as those your rulers often hide behind are weakened. And this is when the Warp is still; if surrounded by those through whom the Warp flows”, it shook its head, “there have been times where the speculum generates shots almost faster than I can take them. Charlax III for example; the invading splinter fleet never sensed me before I left most of its synapse beasts dead and the chaff leaderless”.

“And that is how I die, how you will bring Commorragh crashing down?” Kaldaz shook his head almost ruefully, “You are *mon-keigh*, a *mon-keigh* unlike any I have known or slain but a *mon-keigh* regardless; whether it be poison, accident, ill-fortune or even age you will die before your quest for redemption is complete”.

"I will, but I won't kill you before that happens Kaldaz; I said before I could feel some pity for you and the other vat-born and I did not lie", there was a surprising softness in the assassins' tone, "I know the hell that awaits you after death; that I can and will spare you. The soul, the gateway to the Warp; when you die here I will take your soul into the essence chamber to grant me the life I crave. But the chamber's not a perfect sanctuary; even now I feel my present one crumble, consumed by my non-being – if I were to open the animus eye it would be converted to energy and released, gone in an instant and utterly destroyed. Oblivion will be my gift to you", it readied itself to fight once more, features hardening, "I will take your life, but She-Who-Thirsts will be denied your soul".

Kaldaz paused, a statue as he digested this news before, surprising even himself, he simply laughed, long and loud; the assassin didn't strike, allowing the Eldar his moment of levity and cocking its head as he spoke with genuine mirth in his tone,

"You're a true contradiction Culexus", he admitted, "you would kill me yet save me, spare me eternal torture by granting me eternal nothingness. You called us mirrors of each other", he shook his head, "you were wrong; if our positions were reversed I wouldn't grant you such mercy". The *mon-keigh* echoed his laughter with a gruff snicker,

"I won't either, not for all your kind; sadly unless you erase their soul it's otherwise very difficult to make sure a Haemonculus stays dead, otherwise I'd throw them in Slaanesh's maw myself". Kaldaz stared at his opponent for a long minute before, eventually, smiling,

"In that, at least, we reflect each other. Still, you want my soul", *Scorn* was raised in the space between eye-blinks, a pitiful shield but a shield nonetheless, "come and claim it if you can!" His answer was a single, respectful nod,

"As you wish".

Kaldaz knew he was going to die and with that certainty was more alive than ever before; even up to his knees in offal and blood during raids in real-space, he had never before felt such a thrill as he parried, slashed and danced with his assailant. Embracing his end, torment or nothingness, he held back nothing, his skill and dexterity unfettered in a manner that would have seen him instantly executed by the Queen of Thorns herself. With *Scorn* in his hands would likely have been her match, perhaps her master, something he had been forced to hide to safeguard his existence; now Kaleena and all the rules of Commorragh were gone, their strictures in tatters and him finally, at the end, free.

In this death-match, fighting for nothing save himself and, perhaps, the idea that by killing this *mon-keigh* he would end a threat to his entire species, all other concerns and cares faded until there was just him, *Scorn* and his opponent, an opponent he simply could not best. Every parry kept him alive a heartbeat longer, a heartbeat to savour the taste of the air, feel the exquisite sensation of

his own sweat, every strike sent adrenaline and other chemicals through his system, their fierce burn a thrill to his veins and his core. The assassin came in low and like a thought his klaive was blocking only to be suddenly thrust overhead, the *mon-keigh's* shoulder bulling him backwards. His knees hit something solid and buckled, pain more ferocious and searing than any he could remember shooting through his thighs and buttocks as a hundred small needles pierced them; the human's face was inches from his own, his sword pinning *Scorn* above them both. The assassins' breath was hot and sour, the beat of his heart magnified in Kaldaz's single ear until it was overridden by his harsh but, somehow, reassuring voice,

"Your throne dracon", it looked him dead in the eye and with a thrill of glacial terror Kaldaz realised where he was and why the assassin had forced him here; *unchallenged upon the throne they lusted after, the end any Ynneas Eldarith would wish for*, "it will be brief".

The eye of the animus speculum opened; in the microsecond of coherent thought he had left Kaldaz realised its light wasn't red but more a complex mixture of colours, something that couldn't be truly comprehended by the living. Then the nothingness, a hundred times more powerful at this close distance, swept over and through him, the last command of the Culexus heard but not understood by his victim,

"Kiss me..."

Unlike the Lhamaean, Kaldaz didn't have time to scream before his lips were smothered by his vanquisher.

The first second of rebirth is the most glorious and the most dangerous.

It cannot be explained, not to one who is not a Blacksoul; it is water to one who has thirsted forever, the first breath for one who has never had air. Everything I was ever taught, emotions explained as vague concepts to be aped alive and awake once more. In that single instant I am as no assassin should be – I am off guard, open to attack but even as I realise this instincts reassert themselves, the vulnerability passes and I remember both where I am and what I was doing.

I lower Kaldaz's blade so it sits across his knees and close his eyes; he fought far harder, with more conviction than his dracon and so, in death, holds his rightful place. But right and wrong, just like good or evil, they are not things I truly understand; in many ways the xenograft was a personal tragedy. Before this Eldar thing burdened me with the curse of feeling my life was simple – I trained, I received orders, I obeyed and I killed. Human contact was forbidden, the Culexus temple is unknown save to those with the highest clearance, those who speak for the Emperor, His right hands and regents. We are not the Eversor, blood-crazed killing machines who's rampages are

legendary; only in secrecy do we survive for there are many, even in the highest places, who would see my former temple consigned to the flames and every Blacksoul extinguished forever.

And yet even knowing all this, realising how perilously my brothers and sisters in genetic damnation balance on the blades' edge, I cannot help but chuckle at such a fate; who in the Imperium would even know if we were destroyed?

I step down from the dais, leaving Kaldaz to reign over his kingdom of the dead; to paraphrase an old Gothic saying the inquisitor was fond of, if the one-eyed man is king in the land of the blind, is someone who no longer exists deified to the damned? I think on this as I step away, knowing my time is short. The first-barb was strong but I can feel him breaking already; I have one final task to perform in his name, one last vengeance to slake. I hear my footfalls echo, only two currently-living things left in this place and the vultures will soon gather – I must be away before then, my mission must continue.

Must, no, that's wrong; it doesn't have to. Memory is the single constant between the two sides of my existence, between me and the killer-me. I know I am free to do as I please; I am Omega to my temple and outcast to the Imperium, bound only by a promise to a woman I barely know and cannot trust. Yet as soon as I am gone and the monster within me is unleashed my actions won't matter – all he knows is the mission, he can understand nothing else. Sometimes I doubt he recognises I exist as I do him; memory is the only constant between us and through it I remember his life as though living behind eyes not my own, my body a puppet in the hands of a terrible artist. It is that dislocation, that sense of space between me and what he had done that keeps me sane; I see the heinous deeds he performed in the Emperors' name but know I am not responsible for any of them. Does he see the same when he regards my actions, is he even now looking through my eyes, asking the same question that runs in my head?

How could I be so foolish, so blind, to act as he does?

It is not a question I dwell upon long for fear of the answer; instead I recall the tally of targets – it's been a bloody harvest. A raiding Kabal all but destroyed and an alpha target obliterated utterly, ensuring their dead remain that way. There are other such targets in this miserly scrap of webway outside great Commorragh itself and I will see them all destroyed before I plunge deeper into the lair of the Ynneas Eldarith. My skills must be further honed before I hunt more dangerous prey – the Culexus temple does not teach its soldiers the art of the blade or the gun. Had it not been for the training I put myself through prior to my final task even an assassin such as the killer-me may well already be dead and unmourned in this twilight citadel.

I understand why though – we are kept unarmed because the Imperium cannot trust us, the bitterest irony of all. We are the only warriors it has who cannot fall to the Ruinous Powers; the noble Astartes, the countless Astra, the preaching Sororitates; even the demi-god sons of Him on Earth cannot make that boast, but it trusts them above any of us. Our every movement is monitored, even our combat performance watched over by our Custodians because the Imperium knows any one of us, a single renegade Blacksoul, could be the bane of the entire Empire of Man. Every one of us is born an infiltrator; normal mortals cannot bring themselves to perceive us and those with the Warpsight cannot abide our presence, so we go unseen – this alone, perhaps more than our training or the animus, would allow a rogue Culexus to do what even the Arch-Traitor could not. The God-Emperor, the Lord of all Mankind and Saviour of the Imperium, he is a presence in the Warp, his beacon blind to us who serve him most loyally. He is a ghost, a being of the Immaterium and against even a rogue member of my former temple, there is the possibility He may be destroyed – heresy perhaps, blasphemy of the highest and most damning order, but the truth nevertheless.

So the Imperium cannot trust us.

This is why I must die as I lived, in service to the Golden Throne, a fate I may have spared unknown millions of future souls. I know not if the inquisitors' trials would have brought about the changes I spoke to Kaldaz of, if the Adeptus Biologus could have replicated the vat-birthing process for human protophages and for my sake I am glad for such ignorance. The Imperium is already a cold machine of blood and steel, emotion weakness and mercy a mortal sin; if the means to create them was discovered and mass-produced, how long before human vat-born were considered lesser, more expendable than true-born humans? I have heard of commanders who boast of choking the Eye of Terror in corpses; if the armies they craved became so easily available, how long before such men began frittering them away, treating their soldiers' lives as ammunition, an asset to be spend and replenished as necessary? To spare unborn billions a short, brutal life of exploitation, oppression and death I walked into Commorragh with another sin to confess; the inquisitor will never have her prize. She, like all who claim to speak for the Emperor, does so with a forked tongue – to protect humanity she would see it mimic the Ynneas Eldarith, expending slaves for seconds of peace and protection.

It will not happen, I have ensured it; even as the stolen raider-craft was powered to deliver me to this hell the second forbidden target was throttled by my hand, the alpha majoris target forever unable to aid the Imperium or warn the Ynneas Eldarith of my coming.

But even as I felt his heartbeat still under my fingertips my own dream died with him; killer-me would not have done such a thing, his death was the first I committed, the one I feel no regret for .

Kaldaz alone knew the dream I held, however briefly, before I realised it could never be – even if she held her word and the prisoner lived, the masters of the Culexus temple would not adopt the xenotech. It would be too costly, too unknown and most of all too dangerous; one Blacksoul had already been lost to this strange technology its alien urges, how many others could follow him? How many more Omega missions would be issued for operatives broken by these new sensations, and of greater concern, how great the risk of a renegade, the one thing unheard of from the Blacksoul ranks?

No, they would never have been granted the keys to the cage but even as the alpha majoris withered to nothing in its prison and I mourned the death of my first, fragile dream, I consoled myself that at least they would never know what could be. It is perhaps better to live in shadow than continually burn trying to stand in the light – I did not lie to Kaldaz, I should never have been freed from the cage of my cursed genes. I am half a man, one who must kill to live and lives consumed by regret that he kills – I live yet fear living, in some ways I envy the other half of me, the half that even now starts to awaken. The first-barbs' soul is breaking apart trying to fill the void of my non-existence; I must complete my final task and be gone from this place of the dead.

I am not Callidus; those women who rely on chemicals to go where Culexus merely walk unseen; but I know enough escapology to leave the sanctum through the doors I left Kaldaz's gift upon. Where the head and shoulders go the rest of the body will follow and not half a moment later I am outside the inner sanctum, gazing up at the Eldar woman the killer-me dragged unconscious from the chambers after slaughtering her court. He didn't suspend her though, to him it would have been inefficient – instead he drained the soul from one of her sycophants and allowed me to interrogate her, a skill beyond him due to his interrogation subjects usually undergoing unfortunate and spontaneous cardiac arrest. I took the knowledge from her fractured mind and, seeing her crimes against her own kind, took revenge on their behalf, a little justice for the vat-born as there will never be for my kind in the Imperium. As I gaze at her flayed, suspended form I sneer in contempt; she and others like her, they're the reason I am glad my Omega mission sent me here rather than anywhere else in this cursed, dying galaxy.

I once thought, when I gain the capacity to think beyond the next target and the next mission, the Imperium functioned upon fear, humanity held together because only united could it survive its many enemies. However in the time I trained before this last mission I realised that was untrue; it's not fear that binds humanity together but ignorance. The vast majority of the Emperors' subjects have not the slightest inkling of the threats they face, how close humanity is to dying out; in that protective cocoon they live happy and content doing the Emperor's work. They till the fields to feed His armies, pack munitions to feed the never-sated war machine and even wait as bait in traps for His enemies. If they knew, truly knew their peril, the dangers their masters can't protect them from

or actively throw them in the path of the Imperium would cease to exist – fear would break our galactic empire, one of the reasons it hates those like me so.

No, it is the Eldar, both Craftworld and Dark, the last remnants of a people that once tamed the stars who survive because of terror. Though they'll not admit it every one of them, farseer and dracon, raider prince to humblest craftsman, lives in utter dread of the nightmare god their ancestors spawned from hedonism. Their every action, be it as individuals or loose Kabals in Commorragh or entire Craftworlds, is guided to preserve themselves, to delay their final damnation regardless of the cost to other races. They are deceitful because they deceive even themselves, believing their intentions are nobly restoring their lost worlds or teaching the lesser races their place but the taint of fear runs through them and will until the last of them is dead. It is intolerable to them, the Ynneas Eldarith especially, that they, blessed ones now laid low, must labour under the burden of such a fear so they seek to lay it over others, becoming monsters in the shadows to convince themselves that, if they are the embodiment of fear, how can they fear anything, even their own thirsty god? That arrogance, that hypocritical refusal to admit their own failings and instead seek to spread them to others is the reason I am glad to be here, will be here until I die.

Well, unless the Imperium should have dire need of me again; I glance at the small, featureless box on my wrist, a curious bauble worth more than most Imperial planets and everything on and in them. Archeotech, unable to be replicated in this degenerate age, a way back to real-space from this world of shadows, fatal to other men but not me. Most would be safer dead than dragged through the nightmares of the Warp but a Blacksoul is proof against the insanity and would survive transit. It is a hope, another hope, that I both treasure and despise; it is my last chance at redemption in the eyes of everything I have ever known, yet to answer the call when or if it comes may well be a surer death than anything Commorragh is likely to provide. I rub the casing of the ancient device and look away, back to the so-called dracon whom I cast down, and I smile as I realise she will be the first of many who I will teach the truth before they die.

The Ynneas Eldarith think themselves above the fear that suffuses their entire race; I, both of me, will see that arrogance shattered before I grant them the mercy of oblivion; if they won't fear She-Who-Thirsts, they will fear me.

But this one has gone too far; the killer-me has broken her utterly and I am left with execution duty and a promise to keep. I look up at the dangling Queen of Thorns, kept alive by the agony of her own weapon, and I speak even as I send the pulse of thought to my aminus speculum, my words a low hiss in the darkness as I prepare for the temporary end of my existence,

“You were never worthy of a warrior such as him witch”.

The last thought that crosses my mind before I plunge back into my cage is that, despite being dead, through my aid Kaldaz is killing his dracon as he so often dreamed of doing.

I hope he appreciates it...

...Target eliminated, alpha minoris. Mission continues. Exit location, locate next alpha target and eliminate. Upon alpha target elimination...

...live.